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# Reasons for officiating soccer: the role of passion-based motivations among Norwegian elite and non-elite referees

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**Abstract.** This study examines the reasons for officiating soccer among Norwegian elite and non-elite referees. Eighty-three elite referees and 44 non-elite referees completed a web-based questionnaire (SurveyXact) that solicited their three main reasons for officiating soccer. The data were obtained by bracketing, intuiting, and describing their different reasons. Three main categories of descriptions emerged (percentage elite/non-elite): passion-based motivations (57/25%), social-based motivations (25/25%), and fitness-based motivations (13/31%). Norwegian elite referees are significantly more passion-based motivated than non-elite referees in the lower-level leagues. The prevalence of fitness-based motivations was significantly lower for elite referees than for non-elite referees. Social-based motivations had approximately the same importance for the two different groups of soccer referees.

**Key words:** Officiating motivation, soccer referees, fitness, passion, enjoyment

**Résumé.** Les raisons de l'arbitrage en football : Le rôle des motivations basées sur la passion parmi les arbitres élite et non-élite norvégiens.

Cette étude examine les raisons de l'investissement des arbitres de football élite et non-élite norvégiens. Quatre-vingt-trois arbitres élite et 44 non-élite ont complété un questionnaire en ligne (SurveyXact) interrogeant leurs trois principales raisons d'exercer la fonction d'arbitre de football. Les données ont été obtenues par époché, intuition et description de leurs différentes raisons. Trois principales catégories descriptives émergent (pourcentage élite/non-élite) : les motivations liées à la passion (57/25 %), les motivations sociales (25/25 %) et les motivations liées à la santé (13/31 %). Les arbitres élite norvégiens sont significativement plus motivés par la passion que les arbitres non-élite. La fréquence de motivations liées à la santé est significativement plus basse pour les arbitres élite que pour les autres. Les motivations sociales ont approximativement la même importance pour les deux groupes d'arbitres.

**Mots clés :** Motivation à l'arbitrage, arbitre de football, santé, passion, plaisir

## 1 Introduction

Few if any other sports activities engage people more intensely than soccer. The passion for this sport often leads to highly emotional outcomes for spectators, players, coaches, and officials. Soccer referees are examined intensely, especially at the elite (and international) level of the game, and more often than not, that scrutiny leads to criticism rather than praise (Colwell, 2000). Some years ago after a draw at home against Sunderland, Sir Alex Ferguson (the famous Manchester United manager) told the press that, at 49 years old, referee Alan Wiley was “not fit enough for a game of that standard and that is an indictment of our game”. However, the referee actually covered 11.039 m during that game (Szczepanik, 2009),

and he had an average distance from the ball of 17.7 m, which more than satisfies the limit of 20 m required by the Football Association in England. In fact, ProZone analyses showed that the referee ran 206 m more than the average distance covered by the players. This kind of criticism and other forms of social pressure are a part of the soccer refereeing context (Ventura de Moraes, 2012). Thus, as Poolton, Siu, and Masters (2011) ask: why would anyone voluntarily take on the unenviable task of officiating a soccer game?

Fry and Sefton (1982) revealed that the main motivations people have for being sports officials in Canada are the love of the sport (54.1%), service to the community (44.5%), and personal pleasure (42%). Auger, Fortier, Thibault, Magny, and Gravelle (2010) noted that officials

make a commitment out of passion and love for the sport, to enjoy their leisure, and for personal growth. More than 25 years after the Fry and Sefton (1982) study, Auger, *et al.* (2010) examined the motivations of Canadian regional officials to officiate in sporting events and their reasons for quitting (*e.g.*, lack of support, lack of time, negative image of referees, and criticism by the fans and the media), and their results were more or less in line with Fry and Sefton's findings. However, Dawson and Dobson (2010) have noted that, although studies of referees' and other sports officials' motivations are limited; this kind of work provides important information about what motivates someone to become a soccer referee. Folkesson, Nyberg, Archer, and Norlander (2002) concluded that referees are highly motivated to be referees and that they display a strong interest in their sports. Ortega (2013) reported that soccer referees' most important reasons for refereeing were intrinsic (*e.g.*, *I get satisfaction out of refereeing*), whereas their least important reasons were more extrinsic (*e.g.*, *that I receive payment for refereeing*). Friman, Nyberg, and Norlander (2004) found that, despite the negative perceptions of and threats and aggression experienced by referees in Swedish soccer, many of them stated that it was fun being a soccer referee. Friman, *et al.* (2004) reported that the most important motivations for refereeing were *interest, officiating, travel, training, meeting people, fun, and decision-making*. Given the nature of these motivations for refereeing and the fact that soccer referees spend much time perfecting their craft and honing their skills, one may conclude, as did Philippe, Vallerand, Andrianarisoa, and Brunel (2009), that referees are very passionate about their officiating.

Vallerand and colleagues (Vallerand, 2008; Vallerand & Houliort, 2003; Vallerand & Miquelon, 2007; Vallerand, *et al.*, 2007; Vallerand, *et al.*, 2003) have defined passion in sport as a strong inclination towards or desire for an activity that one likes (or even loves), that one finds important (values highly), and in which one invests time and energy. According to Vallerand, *et al.* (2007), being passionate about an activity (such as officiating soccer) may ensure dedication towards the activity and eventually participation in it. Such passion may also be associated with positive and negative subjective well-being, depending upon the type of passion involved. Vallerand, *et al.* (2003) proposed a dualistic model of passion. The first type of passion is harmonious passion (HP), which results from an autonomous internalization of the activity into the person's identity. Autonomous internalization occurs when individuals have freely accepted the activity as being important for them without any contingencies (Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to Philippe, Vallerand, Andrianarisoa, and Brunel (2009), the activity is integrated with the person's other self-structures and consequently it occupies a significant (but not overpowering) space in the person's identity. Moreover, HP may allow the person to concentrate better on the task at hand (refereeing soccer) and experience positive emotions and flow while engaging in the activity. Such control over the activity should

be conducive to positive and adaptive affective and cognitive functioning during the activity (*i.e.*, officiating a game of soccer). The second type of passion Vallerand, *et al.* (2003) identified is obsessive passion (OP). In this type of passion, the activity is not under the person's control, as it comes to occupy an overwhelming space in the person's identity. One could say that it is as if the activity controlled the person. Philippe, *et al.* (2009) emphasized that such pressured engagement prevents the person from fully focusing on the task at hand (*i.e.*, officiating a game of soccer) and makes it very difficult for the person to fully disengage from thinking about performing the activity, or ruminating (Poolton, *et al.*, 2011). In other words, OP generally leads to negative and less adaptive affective and cognitive functioning while performing an activity such as refereeing a soccer match. Furthermore, Philippe and colleagues found that referees made different decisions after committing an error depending on whether they were harmoniously or obsessively passionate in their refereeing. Harmoniously passionate referees appear to make neutral decisions after an error, whereas obsessively passionate referees appear to make biased decisions after committing an error. According to Philippe, *et al.* (2009), this may be because they cannot control their affective experience and rumination (Poolton, *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, the human nature of refereeing guarantees that mistakes will be made (Hoseini, Aslankhani, Abdoli, & Mohammadi, 2011; Page & Page, 2010; Sutter & Kocher, 2004), and people who love soccer consider this part of the game's charm (Di Corrado, Pellarin, & Agostini, 2011). Fortunately, many referees are officiating soccer games repeatedly. What makes them tick year after year, and more interestingly, what motivates them? Those individuals who officiate for a living (very few overall) are exposed to a number of stressful factors throughout the game (Dohmen, 2008; Nevill, Balmer, & Williams, 2002; Thatcher, 2005). In fact, referees' decisions have now become a central focus of match analyses, and because some of a referee's decision-making processes are guided by subjective judgement, soccer referees are often accused of being inconsistent, making wrong calls, and being biased (Dawson & Dobson, 2010). However, the broader context of the soccer industry, with increasing pressure on top-level football personnel and the relationships between referees, players, coaches, fans, and the media, requires a respectful understanding of everyone's passionate behaviour during a soccer game, not just the behaviour of the referees. One may ask whether referees are simply passionate about soccer and the activity of officiating soccer. Philippe, *et al.* (2009) emphasize that referees are sport participants in their own right, that they are highly motivated and passionate about their officiating, and that the league level is related to the strength of this passion (*i.e.*, the higher the league level, the greater the passion). They suggested that there are three possible explanations for this relationship: (a) refereeing at a higher league level leads to increased passion; (b) greater passion is a matter of self-selection—highly passionate referees are more

inclined to pursue officiating at higher league levels; and (c) it is a combination of (a) and (b). Hence, Philippe, *et al.* (2009) recommend further research to examine this issue more closely.

Regardless of motivational issues, type of passion, and aspects of emotions in refereeing, research that highlights referees' motives for refereeing soccer (including becoming a soccer referee and continuing to referee, especially as a top-class referee) is needed to explore this phenomenon further. Therefore, the first aim of this study was to examine Norwegian elite and non-elite referees' reasons for officiating soccer matches. Prompted by previous research suggesting that referees are highly passionate and that league level is related to the strength of their passion (*e.g.*, Philippe, *et al.*, 2009), the second aim of this study was to compare the prevalence and type of passion expressed by elite and non-elite referees in their reasons for refereeing.

## 2 Methods

### 2.1 Participants

Two samples of participants were recruited for this study. Sample 1 was composed of Norwegian referees and assistant referees from the first level (Tippeligaen) and the second level (Adeccoliga) leagues for men, and from the premier league (Toppserien) for women. Eighty-three (73 males and 10 females) of the 98 top-class referees in Norway (84.7%), ranging in age from 20 to 46 years (mean (SD) age = 33.2 (7.2) years), completed a questionnaire as a part of the cross-sectional study, "Norwegian Elite Referees in Soccer" (Johansen & Haugen, 2013). Sample 2 was composed of 44 out of 50 non-elite referees (41 males, 3 females), ranging in age from 15 to 70 years (mean (SD) age = 38.3 (13) years), who attended a local training seminar for active referees. The non-elite referees were all officiating in regional and/or lower-level leagues in Norway.

### 2.2 Procedure

The data (Samples 1 and 2) were collected with SurveyX-act, a web-based program for administering electronic questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed by email to all of the elite referees (Sample 1), as ranked and listed by the Norwegian Football Federation (NFF), and to the non-elite referees (Sample 2). The email was sent by the head of the elite referees in the NFF, who encouraged referees to take part in this study. The email provided a link to the questionnaire, and it was accessible for 30 days. The first page of the questionnaire informed referees of the purpose of the study and emphasized that participation was voluntary and anonymous. Completed questionnaires were made available for scientific use by the researchers at our university, and the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) approved the study.

## 2.3 Instrumentation and data analysis

### Reasons for officiating soccer

An open-ended question was used to ask referees to provide their three main reasons or motivations for officiating soccer. The data were analysed using a well-specified phenomenological procedure for qualitative research (Marton, 1995). The results were obtained by bracketing, intuiting, and describing the different motivations, organized into categories of description. As used in psychology, this phenomenological method was formulated by Giorgi (1970, 1997) and consists of three parts: (a) reduction, which refers to ignoring theoretical and other knowledge about how the phenomenon originates and concentrating on the material at hand to discern what is relevant; (b) description, which avoids interpretation of the material; and (c) seeking the essence, which uses the concentrated descriptions obtained in parts (a) and (b) to arrive at the essential structures. Data analysis in the present study was based on "the empirical phenomenological psychological method" developed by Marton (1995), based on Giorgi's work. Marton's (1995) phenomenological method attempts to describe the structure of the meaning of a phenomenon, in this case, reasons for officiating soccer. The different categories of description that emerged in this study were examined and regrouped by two colleagues. In addition, to test the difference in proportion of reasons reported by elite and non-elite referees,  $2 \times 2$  chi-square contingency tables were used. The cut-off for a significant p-value was Bonferroni-corrected ( $\alpha_{adj} = 0.05/4 = 0.013$ ) according to the number of hypotheses tested.

## 3 Results

### 3.1 Reasons for refereeing

In Sample 1 (elite referees), 236 (94%) of the 249 different reasons reported for refereeing soccer were bracketed and grouped, and three main categories emerged: passion-based reasons, 57% (143 statements such as *simply love soccer, enjoyment, excitement*); social reasons, 25% (62 statements such as *meeting people, staying in soccer, soccer family, member of the officiating team*); and fitness-based reasons, 13% (31 statements such as *physical activity, being in good shape, body appearance*). Of the 13 remaining reasons (5.2%), seven were related to leadership (2.8%), five were related to decision-making (2.0%), and one economic reason was reported (0.4%).

In Sample 2 (non-elite referees), 107 (81%) of the 132 different reasons reported for refereeing soccer were bracketed and grouped, and three main categories emerged: passion-based reasons, 25% (33 statements, such as *simply love soccer, enjoyment, excitement*); social reasons, 25% (33 statements such as *meeting people, staying in soccer, soccer family, member of the officiating team*); and fitness-based reasons, 31% (41 statements

such as *physical activity, being in good shape, body appearance*). Of the 25 remaining statements (19%), 11 were economic reasons (8.4%), seven were related to leadership (5.3%), and seven were related to decision-making (5.3%).

A comparison between elite and non-elite referees in Norway of the reasons for officiating soccer is provided in Figure 1. As Figure 1 shows, the percentage of passion-based reasons reported by the elite referees (57%) was significantly higher than the percentage for the non-elite referees (25%). For fitness-based reasons the percentage reported by non-elite referees (31%) was significantly higher than the percentage for the elite referees (13%). There was no difference in the percentage of social-based reasons reported by the referees (25% for both elite and non-elite). In addition, the percentage of “other” reasons reported was significantly higher in the non-elite group than in the elite group.

### 3.2 Types of passion-based reasons

Given the significant difference (57% *versus* 25%; see Fig. 1) between the passion-based reasons reported by the elite and non-elite referees, a further analysis of this category among elite referees (Sample 1) was conducted. This analysis followed the same phenomenological procedure for qualitative research as described in the method section. Data were obtained by bracketing, intuiting, and describing the different motivations, organized into categories of description. Two main categories of passion-based motivations for officiating soccer emerged: 1) activity-related passion (61 of 143 statements, *e.g.*, *enjoyable, excitement, incredible fun*); and 2) performance-related passion (82 of 143 statements, *e.g.*, *coping with stressful situations, mental fulfilment, feeling of success, task fulfilment, competitive situation*).

## 4 Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to examine motives for officiating soccer among Norwegian elite and non-elite referees. We also wanted to compare the role of the prevalence and type of passion-based reasons among these officials. It seems that Norwegian elite referees are rather more passionate about their refereeing than are referees in lower leagues; in addition, they did not report fitness-based reasons as frequently as did the referees in the lower-level leagues. Social reasons seem to have more or less the same importance for the two groups of soccer referees.

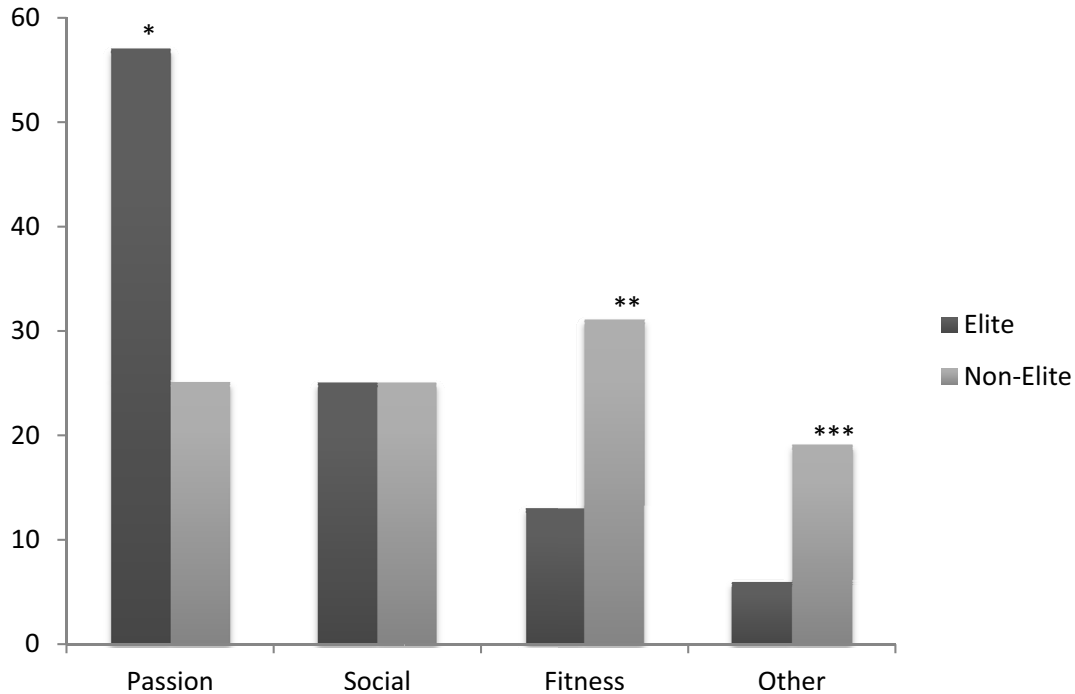
The findings revealed a substantial difference in passion-based motivations for refereeing among Norwegian elite (57%) and non-elite (25%) referees. At first, this may seem quite surprising given the intense scrutiny, criticism, and other forms of social pressure associated with

top soccer refereeing (Ventura de Moraes, 2012). However, one plausible explanation for this difference may be that the elite referees have internalized officiating soccer in an autonomous fashion. They have become part of a broader social environment and have learned over many years to cope with different social pressures. The elite soccer officiating environment and their refereeing colleagues have provided them experiences that give a meaningful rationale for why their officiating is important; this has made them feel they have opportunities to make an impact, and has encouraged them to accept more responsibility for their role as elite referees. Furthermore, because of their refereeing status (ranking), they are almost certainly more likely than non-elite referees to feel that they have control over their refereeing activity and to believe that they have a positive relationship with the person who can help them develop in their profession, namely the head of refereeing for the national federation (Vallerand & Miquelon, 2007). An additional explanation for the discrepancy between the elite and non-elite referees may be that the elite referees are more intrinsically motivated (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and freely engage in refereeing for themselves and enjoy the inherent satisfaction they derive from officiating. The greater passion-based motivation among elite referees indicates that officiating soccer has become a central part of their identities and thus they almost certainly believe that they are better referees than their non-elite counterparts are. Johansen and Haugen (2013) also found this distinction between Norwegian premier and second-level league referees.

There is also reason to believe that the elite referees in this study may be more intrinsically motivated (Deci & Ryan, 2000) than the non-elite referees, given the difference in economic reasons reported. Of the 132 reasons for refereeing the non-elite referees reported, 11 (8.4%) were economic, whereas the elite referees only reported one (0.4%) economic reason out of 249 reasons. Thus, we can assume that the non-elite referees are more extrinsically motivated than are elite referees (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which leads them to engage in refereeing to obtain outcomes that are somewhat separate from the activity itself and that do not provide the same sense of enjoyment that the elite referees feel. Moreover, given that there are no full-time professional referees in Norway, and thus relatively modest incomes are to be made from officiating, we find this result somewhat unexpected.

Another finding that suggests that non-elite referees officiate for reasons that are separate from the activity itself is the frequency with which they cited fitness-based motivations: 31% of the reasons non-elite referees reported for officiating soccer were fitness-based motivations, whereas only 13% of the reasons the elite referees reported were fitness-based. In fact, fitness-based motivations were the most frequent reasons reported by the non-elite referees (Fig. 1). All referees in soccer have to be physically fit, of course, but the physical demands and standards are greater for elite referees than for non-elite referees (Helsen & Bultynck, 2004). Furthermore, we





**Fig. 1.** Comparison of reasons (%) for officiating soccer for elite and non-elite referees.

\* Statistically significant difference between elite and non-elite (chi-square (df) = 36.5 (1),  $p < 0.001$ ).

\*\* Statistically significant difference between elite and non-elite (chi-square (df) = 19.5 (1),  $p < 0.001$ ).

\*\*\* Statistically significant difference between elite and non-elite (chi-square (df) = 18.1 (1),  $p < 0.001$ ).

Social reasons not statistically significant (chi-square (df) = 0.77 (1),  $p = 0.38$ ).

The statistical tests ( $2 \times 2$  chi-square contingency tables) were calculated using absolute values (*i.e.*, numbers of statements), but percentages are shown in this figure for clarity.

know that both physically and psychologically elite referees have to prepare themselves more rigorously than do non-elite referees (Krustrup, *et al.*, 2009). Hence, there is reason to believe that non-elite referees are substantially more likely to regard refereeing as a way to gain physical fitness and improve their physical appearance than elite referees. We might also speculate that there is a gap between actual and perceived physical fitness among non-elite referees (Krustrup, *et al.*, 2009). However, given the passion-based motivations reported by the non-elite referees, it certainly seems that they both enjoy and find great meaning in participating in this “physical activity”.

The different levels of performance and social status of these two groups may explain the difference in passion-based motivations reported by elite and non-elite referees. To reach the elite level of refereeing in Norway (and in other parts of the world), a referee must spend at least 5–10 years of dedicated practice officiating. It has been documented that passion facilitates performance by influencing deliberate practice (Ericsson & Charness, 1994) and achievement goals (Vallerand, *et al.*, 2007). Because passion, especially harmonious passion, leads to deliberate practice, which is conducive to performance (including officiating soccer) and facilitates high levels of subjective well-being, referees who are passionate about their work may be more likely to persist in refereeing and eventually

reach the highest levels of performance (*i.e.*, become elite referees) (Vallerand & Miquelon, 2007). For the elite referees in this study, passion seemed to be an important motivational force in their hard-working and time-consuming routines, and they have completed referee training that is explicitly intended to raise their performance to an international level of soccer officiating. Achieving excellence in any activity (*e.g.*, sport, music, or art) is a long-term process that demands full-time commitment (Lehman & Gruber, 2006). There is reason to believe that without at least an above-average level of passion for an activity as demanding as playing a musical instrument, people would certainly give up before becoming expert (Bonneville-Roussy, Lavigne, & Vallerand, 2011). The low level of passion-based motivations reported by the non-elite referees (Fig. 1) may help to explain why they have not become elite referees. Vallerand, *et al.* (2003) have suggested that we are somewhat less likely to find passionate people in non-expert domains. Consequently, because the sample of elite referees in the present study contained only high-level officials, it is understandable that there was such a high number of passionate referees and, hence, the prevalence of passion-based motivations (Fig. 1).

Results from the second analysis of the passion-based motivations reported by the elite referees in this study revealed two types of passion-related reasons for officiating

soccer: activity-related passion and performance-related passion. This finding indicates that elite referees find officiating to be enjoyable, exciting, and, as many of them reported, great fun. Furthermore, by refereeing soccer matches, they can reduce stress, become mentally fulfilled, attain a feeling of success, and practice leadership. Both of these types of passion-based motivation may be considered as harmonious passion, as conceptualized by Vallerand, *et al.* (2003), and thus we can assume that these two types of passion-based motivation (and their reported prevalence) enable elite referees not only to become elite referees, but also to continue refereeing at an expert level. In fact, several of the elite referees reported that coping with stressful refereeing situations gave them valuable training for handling stressful situations in both their professional occupations and in their lives in general. The elite referees' passion for refereeing almost certainly influences their match concentration favourably, preventing make-up calls and minimizing rumination following wrong calls. Philippe, *et al.* (2009) have suggested that harmonious passion for refereeing protects one from the negative cognitive and emotional consequences associated with refereeing errors, and the extent to which passion-based motivations reported by the elite referees in this study indicates that this is also the case for these referees. In fact, Johansen and Haugen (2013) found that noise and disturbances, refereeing errors, and/or aggressive behaviour in general did not affect Norwegian elite referees' decision-making during matches.

Both the prevalence of passion-based motivations and the two types of passion-related reasons reported by the elite referees in this study provide support for the suggestion that passion represents a major motivational force underlying deliberate practice to attain refereeing excellence and expertise. As Vallerand, *et al.* (2007) have emphasized, passion is an important source of inspiration that allows people to endure long and at times frustrating practice sessions, and it eventually helps them attain high levels of performance. The lower prevalence (25%) of passion-based motivations reported by the non-elite referees indicates that passion does not play a vital part in their refereeing activity, and this may be a plausible explanation for why they are officiating at the regional level and in lower-level leagues. However, when we studied the individual reasons reported, they were more or less the same for non-elite and elite referees (*e.g.*, *simply love soccer, enjoyment, excitement*). Nevertheless, what we find interesting and unexpected is the prevalence of passion-based motivation (57%) among the elite referees in this study and, especially, the extent to which they enjoy officiating soccer and find it great fun. Furthermore, the findings reveal that the modest income they receive from officiating (they are part-time referees, not professionals) does not by any means appear to be an important motivational factor. Moreover, we can suggest that, to some extent, Norwegian elite referees simply are motivated by being part of the soccer family and playing a vital role in the game, based on research in this field;

there is little reason to believe that this is not also the case for soccer referees in other parts of the world. One could say that Norwegian elite referees officiate for the enjoyment of refereeing and their desire to achieve error-free, excellent performance. The elite referees' engagement for officiating soccer seems to be the key definition of their passion-based motivation and thereby explain their intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000) for conducting this activity. Enforcing the rules during a soccer match gives them great satisfaction and fulfilment; they simply love it and they are highly passionate about it.

#### 4.1 Strengths and limitations

One of the major strengths is the participation rate. Approximately 85% of all Norwegian elite referees participated (Sample 1) in this study, and the participation rate among the non-elite referees (Sample 2) was a remarkable 88%. However, the sample of non-elite referees was a convenience sample, as they were selected through a seminar. Although the sample sizes may be considered moderate ( $N = 83$  and  $N = 44$ , respectively), the high percentage of the total population in Sample 1 (elite referees) is impressive. Whether answers are biased because of social desirability, the tendency of respondents to answer questions in a favourable manner (King & Bruner, 2000), remains unknown. Although participation in the study was voluntary and responses were anonymous, we should note that respondents received an email from the head of referees in Norway encouraging them to participate; this could have affected the response rate and should be taken into account when interpreting these results.

In sum, the present findings highlight the importance of passion in understanding motivations for officiating soccer matches. Subsequent, research is warranted to replicate these findings with other referees (in other countries) and to more firmly establish the role that passion plays in refereeing soccer and other sports. The focus of this study was simply to solicit reasons from elite and non-elite referees for officiating soccer matches. Therefore, future research should use the Passion Scale (Vallerand, *et al.*, 2003) with a larger number of participants to identify elite and non-elite referees' reasons for refereeing that are characterized by harmonious and obsessive passion in order to highlight motivational issues in officiating. Research along these lines would help us to understand not only why some people become (and continue as) soccer referees, but also provide vital information about aspects such as dropout and burnout rates and other cognitive and emotional outcomes of officiating soccer matches.

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